



"To promote Christian ideals for agriculture and rural life; to interpret the spiritual and religious values which inhere in the processes of agriculture and the relationships of rural life; to magnify and dignify the rural church; to provide a means of fellowship and cooperation among rural agencies: *Toward a Christian Rural Civilization.*"

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CHRISTIAN FARMERS OF THE WORLD — UNITE!

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The recent visits of American farmers to Russia and of Russian farmers to Iowa and other midwestern states attracted tremendous interest. From some newspaper accounts this appeared to be an entirely new, unprecedented development in international relations.

As a matter of fact, exchanges of scientifically-trained farmers have been going on for many decades and between many different countries. Foreign students graduating from American and European agricultural colleges have returned to teach and serve their fellow countrymen. Many missionaries from the West, born and reared on farms, have carried agricultural knowledge and experience to the lands that called them. The 160 agricultural specialists now working in the Protestant missionary enterprise; the thousands of experts who have made longer or shorter visits overseas in connection with Point-Four, technical aid, food and agriculture programs; and a smaller number of rural laymen who have undertaken brief trips to observe mission work abroad - these have all contributed to growing understanding and friendship between farm groups of different nationalities.

I would like to suggest today a definite, earnest effort to enlarge and strengthen the brotherhood of Christian farmers around the world. We need cooperation not only between governments but even more between peoples. For the sake of international good will

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and peace the great working populations in all countries should come to know one another better. Walter Reuther has just been to India on behalf of an American labor organization. He and James C. Patton, present of the National Farmers Union, are members of the Board of Trustees of the National Planning Association, which recently made a study of technical cooperation programs in Latin America, including the place of missions in such programs. What can we do on a Christian level?

The farmers of the earth are the largest single body of laborers with a similar type of natural environment, similar kind of occupation, similar outlook on life and religion, similar economic needs and difficulties, and of dispensable value to the whole of society. The number of Christians, particularly Protestant Christians, in this huge rural population of the world is steadily growing.

Could Christian missions and the world-wide Church promote a vocational brotherhood of Christian farmers and farm families? Yes, if we are willing to accept the broader view of missions so as to include laymen with special skills as well as with evangelistic spirit; and if we think of Christians outside the bounds of technical organizations or professional missionary agencies as belonging to such a movement. We should help Christian "dirt farmers" everywhere as well as highly trained agricultural leaders and rural preachers and teachers to become a living part of the universal fellowship of men and women on the soil. Open their eyes to see their place in God's plan; they are all stewards of God's wonderful conserve and use well the precious soil and other resources; they should help one another for the sake of a finer world, and a finer life for all God's children.

Christianity in the first two hundred years spread as much by the testimony of Christians in lay occupations as it did by apostles, special missionaries, church leaders and officers. In the second century, Celsus denounced the new faith because it was spreading rapidly in the Roman Empire "through workers in wool and leather and cloth, through uneducated persons and ignorant women". There is a Chinese saying, "Three smelly leather-workers banded together are equal to one Chu-ko liang - famous general of the Three Kingdoms". The smelly leather-workers and tent-makers and fishermen and farmers and hand-toilers of the early Church had power; they were bound together in Christian purpose and enthusiasm. Every Christian was a preacher, even the most lowly, a witness by his life as well as by his words.

It would be unfortunate, even dangerous, for the world-wide Christian rural fellowship to become a body only of highly educated leaders and writers. This is the day of laymen in the Church, and there are many spiritually wise laymen and laywomen in the small country churches of the world. We need them, too, in the ecumenical movement.

When Miss Muriel Lester was in New York recently she reminded me of a visit that she paid to our Seminary Rural Training Center at Shunhwachen near Nanking. We took her to a village late one evening, called our farmer-friends out of their locked houses, and asked them to sit in a courtyard under the moonlight. They sang some songs for Miss Lester, listened fascinated while she told of her work among the working people of Eastside, London, and talked to her about their daily life, their families, their hopes. The memory of that evening has never left her, Miss Lester said - it suggested to her what might happen all over the world.

All kinds of ecumenical conferences are being held today - World Council of Churches, International Missionary Council, World Council of Christian Education, Youth Assemblies, confessional gatherings (Baptist, Methodist, Presbyterian, Lambeth Conferences, and others). How many Christian farmers do they draw? In connection with one or more of these gatherings could there not be a get-together of Christian agriculturalists and farm workers from different lands, both the better-trained graduates of technical schools and rural leaders and also some down-to-earth rural folk? We do not want to encourage a Marxist type of "class consciousness", certainly we do not want any complicated new organization. I don't think we should try to get formal members. But Agricultural Missions along with other international Christian agencies might well sponsor a closer fellowship between Christian men and women and youth who live and work on the "good earth" and between their churches in different countries. It is not enough to weave patterns between the western missionary-sending societies and the new churches in rural communities everywhere. We should also weave bonds of acquaintance and cooperation between rural churches of the same area, in Asia, in Africa, in Latin America, and from continent to continent. In this fascinating and challenging adventure we may enlist the counsel and assistance of Christian national leaders, agricultural teachers, and rural pastors, as well as missionaries.

In some Christian world conferences sections might be planned which would bring face to face representatives of Christian agricultural service and rural church life from different parts of the earth. Let us find more opportunities for Christian rural folk to share their Christian faith and experience on the background of the revolutionary changes taking place in rural society. The Christian church can certainly invite foreign farmers, if the rural organizations of Iowa can invite Russians to visit them.



and you will be able to give far more - willingly and not under any political or military compulsion - toward realization of the ancient Hebrew prophet's dream, "They shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks...they shall sit every man under his vine and under his fig tree, and none shall make them afraid" (1. Micah 4:3-4).

And we can send Christian farmers, some of our finest students or graduates of agricultural schools here, to visit rural communities abroad, even to spend some time with the farmers there. We can encourage, perhaps Africa, and visa versa. God give us more imagination, more daring. I am simply throwing out an idea today. I hope some one will pick up the ball and run with it.

The Christian Rural Fellowship, broadened to include bands of thoughtful Christian farmers in many nations, should have an inspiring cause to work together for, if it is to be a vital and growing movement. One of the biggest names before farmers of the world, we know, is land tenure. "Land reform" is in the air. How can the farmer own his own land, his own family farm, which is integrated into the national agricultural plan, yet provides security, freedom, welfare and the incentive to creative effort? How can the farmer be freed from degrading poverty and the burdens of excessive taxation and interest rates? How can he make his maximum contribution to society and also receive what he should from society? Christian farmers of the world should formulate a Declaration of Human Rights, a Bill of Rights for all farmers, toward which they may look and strive.

Rural missions in the past has been too much concerned with local problems, local projects, the meeting of immediate local needs. We have not been aware, as the Communists, for example, are aware, of larger economic issues, of basic conditions for bettering agricultural and industrial systems, of the frustration and restlessness of working populations, of revolutionary tides in history. Christians who have a rural concern and outlook should join their forces and tackle some of these basic problems. Let Christian farmers of the world unite around such common objectives as private farm ownership together with national economic planning, just laws for protection of agriculture, opposition to tyranny and exploitation of rural populations, conservation of soil and forests, the strengthening of community spirit and cooperation, uplifting of depressed, and underprivileged farming groups. Let the Church stand on the side of the farming people and not of the absentee landlords and business interests who would make money from the land without giving anything back.

Meanwhile there are many simple and practical things we could do to reinforce Christian agricultural brotherhood. The Committee on World Literacy and Christian Literature is publishing World Christian Books on various subjects to be translated into different languages. Some illustrated booklets on Christian rural ideals and the opportunity of the rural church might be prepared to be used in the same way, around the world. Thus Christian farmers, let us say, in Brazil could read about their rural brothers and sisters in Japan and India. Films and film strips, even without captions and orally explained, could be used in a variety of countries to stretch the minds of rural Christians and make them a conscious part of the world-wide rural family that worships the Creator Father, follows His Son the Carpenter-Farmer of Nazareth, and seeks the illumination and inspiration

of the Holy Spirit in all of life. Certain common modes of worship, certain songs and symbols might be developed that could reach across barriers of race and language, and knit Christians of the countryside into one community of faith. Little gifts or tokens of rural life could be exchanged by farmers of different nations.

Our Christian relief and aid programs need to become more people-to-people movements rather than instruments of national policy. The motto of Technical Assistance, "You can help them help themselves," is not to be implemented merely by technical experts but, also, through farmers who will get to know one another. In all agricultural communities there is a certain amount of mutual help in busy seasons. Why could this spirit not be extended to the world neighborhood, through correspondence, through the sending of such things as heifers, chickens, tools, seeds (as some organizations in America do), through visits back and forth when possible, through linking rural churches in one country to rural churches in other countries? One country church in the United States has a sister country church in the Belgian Congo; a rural church in India exchanges news of its work and plans with a similar church in Indonesia. The missionary is go-between, introducer, interpreter. But the friendships should be as much as possible between the Christian groups themselves. Here is a great adventure before us, with thrilling potentialities.

Dr. James G. Maddox, in his scientific yet warmly sympathetic study of technical assistance by religious agencies in Latin America, says: "Possibly the religious groups could jointly sponsor a non-denominational and non-sectarian organization which would maintain a staff of highly qualified technicians who would serve in a continuing analytical and advisory capacity for all missionary programs in Latin America." A big order! I heartily endorse the proposal. But, at the same time, we should strengthen the personal as well as scientific and technological side of agricultural missions. Increased emphasis on technical assistance, inter-church aid and rural improvement in the missionary movement are a fine thing so long as scientific knowledge and know-how do not preempt the field. Christianity can make a major contribution only if it maintains its unique concern for persons, personal relations, and communal living. The betterment of farmers is even more vital than the betterment of farming.

Let our thinking and planning continue to revolve around the rural church, the spiritual home of rural believers. Here is the real "grass roots" of the ecumenical church. "Workers of the world - unite!" was the appeal of the Communist Manifesto a little over a hundred years ago. I would suggest a Christian call for our time: "Christian farmers of the world - unite!" Witness and serve in the name of Christ in your own little neighborhoods and communities. Bind yourselves together also in a powerful brotherhood of faith and hope and love with other rural Christians nearby and far away. Your own lives will be enriched thereby